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ABSTRACT

Run-on sentences are common mistakes made by Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. One type of these errors, with the structure of an expletive subject "there" and a verb "to be" at the beginning of the sentence, is persistent and not easy to detect and correct. This study proposes that this type of error derives from the different syntactic presentations for indefinite subject noun phrase (NP) between English and Chinese. Chinese does not allow an indefinite NP to be the subject of a sentence unless it is preceded by a syntactic marker "you," which is a verb in current Mandarin Chinese meaning existence or owing. "You" introduces an indefinite NP into the sentence as the subject/topic, which is then followed by the predicate/comment of the sentence. However, English does not have this requirement, as both definite and indefinite NPs can be the subject without any particular marker. On the other hand, English has a presentation structure to introduce an indefinite NP to a discourse and that is with the expletive subject "there" and the verb "to be," followed by the indefinite NP. Since the meaning of the presentation structure is identical with the Chinese syntactic marker, and both constructions are associated with the indefinite NP, Chinese EFL students tend to translate the Chinese "you" sentences directly to English "there-be" sentence structures without noticing that there is more than one finite verb in the English sentence. Because the marking for the indefinite subject in Chinese is more like a semantic requirement than a syntactic process, this unconscious carry-over of the first language interference in learning English is hard to detect and correct. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/SM)

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Indefinite Subject NPs Between English and Chinese: An Error Analysis

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I. Introduction

One very common type of errors in Chinese EFL students' writing is the run-on sentences. It is quite common to see Chinese students write wrong sentences as illustrated in the following:

1. a. Jack lost the game (so) felt very frustrated.
   b. People live in a metropolitan city have to tolerate air pollution.
   c. Nowadays, there are about 40% of young people prefer to remain single.

In each of these sentences there is lack of subject for the second clause and sometimes there is also lack of required conjunction between the two clauses. However, in Chinese, subjectless clauses like these are very common but they are unacceptable in English. Hence, Berk (1999) states that English is a subject-prominent language, which always requires a subject in a sentence. On the other hand, Tsao (1993) observes that in contrast to subject-oriented structure of English, the most common sentence type of Chinese is the topic-comment structure. It is very normal to see a Chinese sentence consist of several clauses, connected by a shared NP called the topic. As shown in (2a), *zhang-san* is the topic and shared by the following three clauses as their understood subject. Besides, Chinese language often does not have clear syntactic markers to indicate the hierarchical structure between the embedded and the matrix clauses. Instead, the word order is commonly used to indicate the syntactic hierarchy, as exemplified in (2b). Since the last predicate *shi shi-shi* is taken as the predicate of the matrix clause, the preceding clause is automatically regarded as an embedded clause even though there is no such syntactic marker as *that* in the corresponding English translation.

2. a. zhang-san zhu zai jiao-wai, mei-tian lai-hui tung-che, hen xin-ku.
      John live at country everyday come-go commute very tiresome
      John lives in the country; he commutes everyday and it is very tiresome.
   b. ta shi hoa ren shi shi-shi.
      he be good person be fact
      That he is a good man is a fact.

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Since it is common to see Chinese clauses put together without obvious grammatical markers such as conjunctions or relative pronouns, this linguistic habit often leads students to make the above-mentioned mistakes. However, the interesting thing is that after learning the English sentence structure, some types of errors gradually disappear but some tend to linger in Chinese EFL speakers' sentences.

Among the error types listed in (1), error type (1a), which lacks a subject and/or a coordinator for a sequence of actions, usually disappears first. After an explanation of the necessity of the subject in English sentence structure, students can quickly learn that the correct way to say sentence (1a) is "Jack lost the game so he felt very frustrated. Error type (1b), which lacks a subordinate connector such as a subordinator or a relative pronoun, will also be corrected after some learning of English clausal structure. Students only need to be reminded that the only subject 'people' cannot be shared by two clauses without any grammatical marker. Hence by adding some kind of subordinate connector to embed or subordinate one clause under another, the student can produce a correct sentence like "People who live in a metropolitan city have to tolerate air pollution."

Error type (1c), however, stays longer and even after learning English for a reasonable period of time, many Chinese students still make such mistakes occasionally. Superficially, error types (1b) and (1c) are very similar, in that they each lack subordinate connector. For example, sentence (1c) can easily be corrected by adding a relative pronoun 'who' as in "Nowadays, there are about 40% of young people who prefer to remain single." Yet, there must be a reason why the error type (1c) is more persistent. One possible explanation is that the missing subject in sentences (1a) and (1b) can be easily found out since there is no overt noun phrase right before the verb in the second clause; whereas in sentence (1c) the noun phrase, which is actually the nominal predicate of the first clause, can easily be mistaken as the subject of the second clause due to its immediate adjacency to the verb. Yet another more important reason could be that noun phrase in sentence (1c) is indefinite and in Chinese indefinite subject noun phrase (NP) has to be specially marked. This semantic concept, presented in syntax as a particular structure, from the first language (L1) of the learner often times will interfere with the learning of the second language (L2) unconsciously. In the foreign language learning process, we often find that it is

not too hard to correct an error that arises purely from form or structure differences but it is comparatively much harder to detect and correct an error relating to semantic or conceptual differences. Maybe this is the hidden cause of the lingering error type (1c).

In this paper, a linguistic analysis is proposed to account for the resistance of (1c) error type to go away. Section One briefly introduces the reason and types of run-on sentences made by Chinese EFL students. Section Two explores and summaries the characteristics of one particular type of error sentences that refuese to go away. In Section Three, the definiteness and indefiniteness of the subject NP will be discussed and a cross-linguistic comparison will be conducted to see how English and Chinese are different in presenting this syntactic feature. Section Four is a conclusion, summarizing the different syntactic representation of this subtle concept in subject between English and Chinese and reminding language teachers to appreciate students' errors from an analytical angle.

II. Characteristics of the persistent run-on sentences

To understand why error sentences (1a-b) will gradually disappear but error sentence (1c) usually lingers longer, we need to look into the differences between these types of sentences. Unlike error sentences (1a-b), sentence (1c) has certain characteristics. First, it doesn't have two events or activities represented by two action verbs as in other run-on sentences. It usually has one action verb and a verb to be. Secondly, the sentence always begins with "there is/are" or similar variants with different tenses or aspects, such as "there was/were" or "there should be" etc., and then the real subject of the sentence.

Perhaps the most important difference between sentences (1a-b) and sentence (1c) is the subject noun phrase in the latter is always indefinite while the subject of the former is not necessarily so. In fact, the "there + be" pattern in English is used to introduce an indefinite object into a discourse before you can describe further about it. The short passage in the following is a good example.

> ...There is a small cottage ahead. The detective walks carefully towards it without making any noise. He peeps through the window. There is no one in it but there are two rusty iron boxes in the corner. He walks in the cottage and looks around the boxes, wondering what might be stored inside.....

In the passage, the noun phrases (NP) after "there + be" are 'a small cottage,' 'no one,' and 'two rusty iron boxes' and they all are indefinite in nature. After being introduced into the discourse by "there + be" structure, they are recognized as something known and definite, and then can be referred to by pronouns like 'it' (for 'a small cottage') or a definite NP like 'the boxes' (for 'two rusty iron boxes'). Hence, we may conclude that no definite NP will appear after the "there + be" structure since its purpose is to introduce an indefinite or unknown object into the discourse. This is indeed the way, as shown in the sentences in (3)

3. a. *There is Mary in my class.[1]
   b. *There are {your friends/these boys} playing basketball on the court.
   c. *There is the boy I like very much asking me out for a date.

Since proper nouns (e.g. 'Mary' in (3a)), nouns modified by possessive pronouns or definite articles (e.g. your friends/these boys in (3b)), and nouns modified by a relative clause (e.g. the boy I like very much in (3c)) are all definite nouns in nature, they are not allowed to appear after the "there + be" structure. This gives us a feeling that errors made by Chinese EFL students probably have something to do with the definiteness of nouns since the error sentence (1c) also has a "there + be" pattern. In the following section we are going to discuss in details the meaning of (in)definiteness.

III. Definiteness and Indefiniteness of Subject NP

Stockwell et al (1973) groups nouns into either definite or indefinite, as illustrated in (4). A definite NP means the speaker thinks both he and the listener know the noun that he is referring to. An indefinite NP can be of two types: specific and non-specific. A specific indefinite NP is one in which only the speaker knows what he is referring to but not the listener, and the non-specific refers to a situation

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[1] Naturally, there is a special situation where the "there + be" structure is followed by a definite NP as in:

i. There is also Mary, my classmate. She is the dullest blonde a mother would ever pray for.
ii. There is this other man who always makes a noise every morning.
iii. There is James, the Carpenter.

In this situation, the "there + be" structure acts more like an existential marker and is used to place emphasis of someone/something already known instead of presenting a new indefinite identity. The structure cannot have its original presentation function due to the confliction of the (in)definiteness nature between the "there + be" structure and the definite NP. This construction is more marked since the definite NP after "there + be" structure must always be followed by a modifier, but the indefinite NP is not required.

where neither the speaker nor the listener knows the referent. Another way to group noun phrases is according to their reference. Noun phrases can be either referential or non-referential. The referential contains definite and specific nouns and the non-referential includes indefinite and generic nouns, as shown in (5).

4. Definite: The speaker thinks both he and the listener know the noun.
   Indefinite: a. Specific: The speaker thinks only the speaker knows the noun
   b. Non-specific: The speaker thinks neither he nor the listener knows the noun.
5. Referential: a. Definite: The speaker thinks both he and the listener know the noun.
   b. Specific: The speaker thinks only he knows the noun
   Non-referential: The speaker thinks neither he nor the listener knows the noun.

Tang (1988) expands the scope and proposes that nouns can be divided into five categories: proper nouns, definite nouns, specific nouns, generic nouns, and indefinite nouns, as exemplified in (6). The first four categories (6a-d) have a reference and the last category (6e) does not. In English, the reference and the form of the noun are much correlated. Proper nouns and definite noun phrases are usually definite in reference, and indefinite noun phrases are usually indefinite in reference. Generic and specific references are less clear in the correlation. Generic reference can be represented rather freely in one of the following ways: a plural countable noun or a singular uncountable noun, or a singular countable noun preceded by either a definite or indefinite article, as illustrated in (6d). And the specific reference can be expressed with a definite or indefinite singular countable noun, as shown in (6c).

6. a. Proper noun: Bill Gates is the founder of Micro Software.
   b. Definite noun: The girl you mentioned yesterday won the champion.
   c. Specific noun: Judy is going to marry a/the man from Boston
   d. Generic noun: Lions are dangerous./ The/A lion is a dangerous animal.
   e. Indefinite noun: You can call a cab on the street.

Different languages tend to have different syntactic manifestations as to what type of nouns can be placed in a certain grammatical position, such as subject or object. In the following we are going to contrast between English and Chinese the types of nouns that can appear in the subject position.

3.1 Subject NP in English

In English, both definite and indefinite nouns can be in the subject position but

generally subject NPs tend to be definite. Tang (1992) observes that one pragmatic principle in English is the Principle of from Old to New Information, which states that the new information is usually stated in the middle or near the end of a sentence. Based on this, the old information is usually expressed as the subject and the new information is expressed in the predicate, for example as the object of the verb or the preposition. The old information means the speaker knows the object and therefore in syntactic representation is usually shown in definite or specific nouns, while the new information means the speaker doesn't have a specific reference as to the object he is talking about and therefore is usually represented by indefinite nouns. The following sentences illustrate the relationship between (in)definiteness of NPs and their references.

7. a. The President has announced war against the terrorists. (definite)
   b. The/A dog is a faithful animal. (universal reference, specific)
   c. Dogs are faithful animals. (universal reference, specific)
   d. I bought a dog in the Ellis's Pet Shop. (partial reference, specific)
   e. Betty bought dogs as pets. (partial reference; specific)
   f. She wants to buy a dog to keep her company. (indefinite)
   g. A dog is what she needs to keep her company. (indefinite)

The President in (7a) is definite since both the speaker and the listener know who the referent is. In sentences (7b-c) the/a dog and dogs have universal reference since the speaker is talking about a generic type of animal. They are specific in reference. In English, three types of NP can be used in universal reference: namely, definite article + noun, indefinite article + noun, and plural noun. In (7d), the speaker knows which dog he is talking about, so are dogs in (7e). They both are specific in reference. However, in (7f-g) 'a dog' does not have any specific reference since it does not point to any particular dog. Neither the speaker nor the listener has a target referent in mind; hence the NP 'a dog' is indefinite. The difference is the indefinite NP is in the subject position in (7f) and in the object position in (7g).

Although subjects are usually definite NPs denoting old information, we do occasionally see indefinite NPs appear in the subject position in English as in (7g). In addition to the pattern of 'a(n) + N', the indefinite reference can also be represented by plural nouns, as shown in 8(a). Or, if the speaker prefers, an indefinite noun can be introduced into the context with its relative location or with things related to it with the sentence pattern of 'there + be', as shown in 8(b-c). Or the sentence can be

reversed, leaving the indefinite NP at the end of the sentence, as shown in (8d). In sentences (8b-d), the purpose is to shift the indefinite NP away from the apparent position of the subject, to the predicate in (8b-c) or to the end of the sentence in (8d).[2]

8. a. Some houses in the downtown area are for sale. (indefinite)
   b. There is a convenience store around the corner.
   c. There are father, mother, and two children in a typical nuclear family.
   d. On the border of the two countries stood a monument.

Hence, we may say it is comparatively rare to see the subject represented by an indefinite NP though it is possible in English. In the following we are going to see if Chinese has the same restriction on the definiteness of NPs in relation to their roles of subject and objects in a sentence.

3.2 Subject NP in Chinese

Most Chinese linguists agree that Chinese sentences do not allow indefinite NPs in the subject position without any special marker or special pattern (Huang 1989; Tang 1989; Tsao 1993; Cheng 1995; among others). For instance, Chinese sentences in (9) below are all ill-formed due to the indefinite subject NPs, as represented by a quantifier phrase (QP), such as "i-ge" or "i-fu," and the noun.

9. a. *i-ge ren zhong le-tou-cai le.
      One-Cl. person hit lottery Asp.
      A man has won the lottery.
   b. *i-ge ping-guo bu-jian le
      One-Cl. apple neg-see Asp.
      An apple is missing
   c. *i-fu hua gua zai qiang-shan
      One-Cl. painting hang at wall-on
      A painting is hanging on the wall.

Naturally Chinese occasionally has the need to express indefinite NPs in the subject position. In that case, a syntactic marker "*you*"[3] has to appear before the indefinite subject NP so as to make the sentence well-formed. The sentences in (9)

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[2] In a reversed sentence like (8d), the subject is still the indefinite NP at the end of the sentence. The purpose of moving a subject from its normal beginning position to the end of a sentence is to put the new information as indicated by the indefinite NP subject near the end, which is the focus position of a sentence. Here again we can see that indefinite NPs tend to appear near the end of a sentence.

[3] "You" is a verb in Chinese, meaning existing or having. Here in a sentence pattern like this, "you" is grammatical marker to introduce the existence of the following indefinite NP subject. Many papers discuss the functions of "you" (Huang 1989; Tsao & Cheng 1995; Wei 1995; among others)

are all grammatical after the addition of "you" as shown in (10) below.

10. a. you i-ge ren zhong le-tou-cai le.
exist one-Cl. person hit lottery Asp.
There is a man won the lottery.
b. you i-ge ping-guo bu-jian le
exist one-Cl. apple neg-see Asp.
There is a missing apple.
c. you i-fu hua gua zai qian-shan
exist one-Cl. painting hang at wall-on
There is a painting hanging on the wall.

Besides the pattern "number + classifier + noun" as displayed above, indefinite NPs can be represented by bare nouns in Chinese. Similarly, the bare noun has to be preceded by the marker "*you*" since the bare noun is also indefinite in reference. Without "*you*" the sentence will be judged ill-formed, as exemplified in (11). The bare nouns can also stand alone without "*you*" in the subject position, but the meaning of the bare noun is generic in reference, as shown in (12). He (2000) discusses in detail the distinction between bare NPs and indefinite NPs in Chinese.

11. a. *(you) ren lai le.
(exist) person come Asp.
Someone is coming.
b.*(you) shi fa-sheng le
(exist) thing happen Asp.
Something has happened.

12. a. ren you ling-sing.
person have soul
Men have souls.
b. che shi you-yong de jiao-tong gong-ju.
car be useful particle traffic tool
Cars are useful transportation vehicle.

IV. Contrastive Study and Error Analysis

From the observation above, we understand Chinese has a restriction on subject NPs; i.e. no indefinite subject NPs are allowed unless accompanied by the marker of "*you*" while English does not have such a rule. In English, indefinite NPs can be the subject of a sentence as indicated in (7g) and (8a) above. When translating Chinese sentences with indefinite subjects such as (10) and (11) into English, Chinese EFL students tend to begin with 'there + be', which is semantically equivalent to Chinese '*you*' and functionally similar in introducing the indefinite NP. Nevertheless, in

Chinese '*you*' is only a marker not the main verb in the sentence, it is natural for Chinese EFL students to put another verb after the indefinite subject NP, thus forming a run-on sentence in translating English sentences.

This subconscious transfer of Chinese syntactic marker '*you*' into an English sentence can be further proved in the following examples where the indefinite subject NPs get more complicated in structure as shown in (13). Since the whole subjects (that is, 'people' in (13a), 'land' in (13b), and 'apples' in (13c)) are indefinite in reference, the parts of them are still indefinite. Because the syntactic structure gets more complicated and more semantic information is added, students' attention is drawn to focus on the idea, the error of adding 'there + be' is more likely to occur, as shown in (14).

13. a. you er-cheng-jiu de min-zhong zhi-chi tai-du.
have two-10%-nine poss. people support Taiwan-independence
29% of the people support Taiwan-independence.
b. you bu-shao de tu-di i-jing shou-dao zhong-jin-shu de u-ran.
have not-little poss. land already suffer-phase heavy-metal poss. pollute
Quite a great deal of land has been polluted by heavy metal.
c. lan-zi li de ping-guo you liang-ge lan-diao le.
basket inside poss. apple have two-cl. Rotten-phase asp.
Among the apples in the basket, two are rotten.

14. a. *There are 29% of the people support Taiwan-independence.
b. *There is quite a great deal of land has been polluted by heavy metal.
c. *Among the apples in the basket, there are two rotten.

This type of errors occurs even more frequently when the corresponding Chinese translation containing marker '*you*' is provided. Or students might use the direct translation of English word 'have' but actually there is no owning relation that needs to be stated. Following are the translation errors made by my sophomore students, some of whom have studied English for 8 years.

15. a. gen-ju min-diao, you san-fen-zhi-yi de min-zhong fan-dui xing-jian he-si.
According poll have three-divide-in-one poss. people object construct nuclear-four
According to the poll, one-third of the people object the construction of Nuclear Power Plant Four.
a'. *According to the poll, there are one third of the people object the construction of Nuclear Power Plant Four.
b. wo xi-wang gong-gong chang-suo you geng-duo gao-shi lai jin-zhi xi-yan
I hope public place have more sign to prohibit smoke
I hope there are more signs in public places to prohibit smoking.
b'. *I hope public places have more signs to prohibit smoking.

In investigating errors in second/foreign language learning, contrastive analysis and error analysis are often mentioned as useful devices. The former is sometimes effective in predicting students' errors because a contrastive study of the two languages can show areas which may prose difficulty for learners in view of differences between the L1 and the target language. The disadvantage of contrastive analysis is when the data collected are not comprehensive or when the different L2 language structure is unmarked in the universal grammar, the contrastive analysis might predict the wrong areas. Error analysis can help in this aspect; and with the contrastive analysis to explore the possible areas of difficulty, error analysis can help pinpoint the areas where the learning errors may occur. The disadvantage is that error analysis is passive and can only analyze instead of predict students' errors.

In this paper we have used the error analysis to look into the errors in one type of run-on sentences made by Chinese EFL students. We found that in addition to the syntactic differences such as subject present/absent, one or more finite verbs in a clause, etc. between the two languages, the concept like the indefiniteness of subject NPs could also interfere students' English learning in this type of run-on sentences. Since the two languages have different syntactic manifestations to present indefinite subject NPs, the L1 habit often results in L2 error. Besides, the lingering error seems to show that the difference in the concepts is to be even more difficult to overcome than the difference in syntactic structures.

V. Conclusion

Contrastive analysis in language learning usually focuses on the syntactic differences between the first language (L1) and the second/foreign language (L2). However, structure comparison sometimes is not enough. Some errors could come from the conceptual differences such as indefiniteness of NPs in different grammatical positions. In the case studied in this paper, Chinese language does not allow an indefinite NP in the subject position unless accompanied by a syntactic marker '*you*', but English language does not have such a constraint. This semantic difference would lead Chinese EFL students unconsciously to add the 'there + be' or 'have' structure, which is semantically equivalent to Chinese '*you*' marker, to the sentence and thus produce a run-on sentence. And as observed, this type of error stays longer than the errors from the syntactic differences between L1 and L2.

Among the L2 learning errors, the errors from grammaticalization process, such as tense or aspect inflections or grammatical markers for some semantic concepts such as (in)definiteness, gender, duality, inclusiveness etc. are more difficult to overcome and therefore would stay longer or even fossilized and never disappear, as described in Selinker (1992). Linguistic concepts usually exist or are similar among languages, but manifestations could vary in different languages. Usually languages with more complicated grammatical process or more marked in syntactic constructions would be more difficult to learn and would also induce more language transfer errors.

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(James corrected)

Abstract

Run-on sentences are common mistakes made by Chinese EFL students. One type of these errors, with the structure of an expletive subject "there" and a "verb to be" at the beginning of the sentence, is persistent and not easy to detect and correct. This study proposes that this type of error derives from the different syntactic presentations for indefinite subject noun phrase (NP) between English and Chinese.

Chinese does not allow an indefinite NP to be the subject of a sentence unless it is preceded by a syntactic marker *you*, which is a verb in current Mandarin Chinese meaning existence or owing. *You* introduces an indefinite NP into the sentence as the subject/topic, which is then followed by the predicate/comment of the sentence. However, English does not have this requirement as both definite and indefinite NPs can be the subject without any particular marker. On the other hand, English also has a presentation structure to introduce an indefinite NP to a discourse and that is with the expletive subject "there" and the verb "to be," followed by the indefinite NP. Since the meaning of the presentation structure is identical with the Chinese syntactic marker and both constructions are associated with the indefinite NP, Chinese EFL students tend to translate the Chinese *you* sentences directly to English "there-be" sentence structures without noticing that there are more than one finite verbs in the English sentence. Because the marking for the indefinite subject in Chinese is more like a semantic requirement instead of a syntactic process, this unconscious carry-over of the first language interference in learning English is therefore hard to detect and correct.

Key words: run-on sentences, indefinite subject noun phrase, error analysis, contrastive analysis

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